Facilitating Discourse in Academic Settings Through the Lens of an SLP

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1. Introduction

My name is Lydia Conrad and I am a Speech-Language Pathologist for two public elementary schools in Montgomery County, Maryland. In my role in the public schools I work with students both individually and in groups to service their speech-language needs. Such needs involve: fluency disorders (such as stuttering), receptive-expressive language disorders, articulation disorders, etc. The students I work with are ages 3-11 but I have experience working with middle- school age students as well (ages 11-15). A large part of my role involves facilitating discourse on a daily basis with my students. Facilitating discourse not only allows me to see how students are progressing towards their goals but it also encourages the development of their overall oral expression. Whether it is a student who is working on saying their ‘s’ sound the correct way or a student who is working on speaking in grammatically correct sentences, discourse is vital to practicing their skills.

2. Setting Up Therapy to Support Language

Facilitating discourse to me means creating a positive, language-rich environment for students to feel comfortable in which to share their ideas and thoughts. While I often will lead or initiate group discussions in my therapy, it is the ultimate goal for me that students do most of the talking. The first step to enriching a student's speech-language skills is to create a language-rich environment. For me, this involves setting up the therapy room in a way that allows for the flow of language between myself and my students. At my current school, therapy is conducted at a kidney shaped table, where I sit in the middle and my students sit around me. This allows me to access each student from an equal distance as well as for students to see their peers and me. I typically keep my therapy room clean and free of clutter. I am not a fan of a lot of posters or visuals on the wall as I feel that those can sometimes be more

distracting than helpful. Currently I have a list of 'classroom expectations' and a rewards chart to create incentive to follow the rules on my blackboard. One practice I hold that is useful for my students is to create with them a 'goal' card at the beginning of the year. Each of my students has a concrete list of goals and objectives that they are working towards mastering in speech therapy. When we meet for our first speech session of the school year I typically have read my students their goals, as stated on their academic plan, and then we work to paraphrase their goals. An example would be a student whose goal is "Given 1 visual/verbal cue, "James" will speak in 5-7 word correct sentences to describe a picture in 4 out of 5 opportunities". The student and I work together to paraphrase the goal to say something like "I will speak in a full sentence to tell about a picture". I firmly believe that students should know why they are coming to speech-therapy and how what they are working on is helping them reach their goals. This practice of paraphrasing one's goals can be used across academic settings and is a great language activity. Having student's rephrase goals in their own words helps them to measure their own progress and improves their overall personal investment.

3. Introducing the Speech Lesson

At the introduction of each lesson, whether it be a Kindergarten student working on answering different wh-question types or a 4th grade student working on identifying the main idea of a paragraph, I have in the past implemented a 'question of the day' activity. This is where, prior to the lesson, I would write a random question that I know will engage my students in discourse. Questions should be funny or interesting enough so that we can get a 2-3 minute conversation from them. For example, I might ask something like "If you could be any superhero, who would you be and why?" or "If you were stranded on a desert island, what 3 things would you want to have with you?"

I find that opening my sessions this way allows for students to practice their conversation skills in a fun and engaging manner. It allows students to relax and feel comfortable and allows for me to measure their ability to speak in complete sentences, analyze a question, and converse with peers and adults in an informal manner. I may take note on how a student says their /s/ sound in conversation, when they are not hyper-focused on their production. It allows me to see how my student with Autism (who is working on having conversations with peers) engages in back-and-forth discourse. Following our question of the day, I like to

discuss with students what the objective for the lesson is. If it were a speech lesson on how to identify the 'main idea' from a text , I would start my lesson by discussing with the student what they know about the subject already. I may ask the question to the group "what does it mean to tell the main idea of a story?" or "when your teacher talks about the main idea, what does that make you think of?" After this activity, I typically jump into working on that skill, meeting the student where they are at. This may mean a quick re-teach of what 'main idea' is prior to reading some short texts and working together to identify the main idea when given 3 choices. Perhaps the student is already well-versed in their knowledge of 'main idea' and is able to jump right into practicing his/her skills with a grade-level text that is read aloud to them. Allowing students time to tell what they already know allows for the clinician to determine where to begin with addressing a skill and reinforces that knowledge that they already have.

4. Therapy Ideas to Enrich Discourse and Language Skills

Perhaps one of the easiest and most dynamic approaches to developing a child's language skills is to read them a story. I find books to be the most dynamic tools in my therapy toolbox. I can target a child's receptive language skills by asking them wh-questions about the story (e.g. "Who are the characters?" "Where does this story take place?" "Why do you think the character did xxx?"). Books can be used to target sequencing skills; a great way to do this is to have the child retell the story in their own words using the pictures from the story. Wordless picture books can target a child's expressive language skills. I may even use a book for my articulation students to work on a specific sound in a different way.

For students who are English Language Learners (ELL) it is extremely important to use visual aids to help them both with their expressive and receptive language skills. If I am reading a story, I make sure to use a book that has visuals included, so that when I am asking questions during the story, those students can use the pictures to help with their responses. If a student answers in 1-2 words, I will encourage them with phrases like "Can you say that in a sentence?" or "Let's use a full sentence when we answer that". Sentence frames are particularly helpful when eliciting oral responses that may include longer sentences. For example, when answering an inferential question from a text, I may write down the phrase "I think…because…" so that my student has the framework to answer a 'why' question so they can focus more on the

content of their response rather than needing to also come up with the sentence structure.

Many students with receptive-expressive language needs have difficulty with word recall.

They benefit immensely from having access to visuals during my sessions with them to assist with word finding. An activity to work on word-finding that I have found useful is to hold up a picture card and have my students name three attributes about that card, instead of just saying what the picture is of. The attributes may include but not be limited to: size, shape, location (where you can find it), function (how you use it), and category (person, place, animal). An example would be if I held up a card with a picture of scissors, my student could say "I have this in my art box. It is sharp. It is something you use to cut paper." I have found that this activity expands a student's vocabulary and flexibility with language. Through this activity they learn the compensatory strategy of how to describe a word that you are having difficulty retrieving rather than defaulting to nondescript words like "thing" or "stuff" when they are stuck.

Some students benefit from therapy done inside of the classroom, so I will occasionally go into a classroom and co-teach with their general educator in order to target their goals. My preference is to go into the classroom during English or history, or at the start of the day when students are having their morning meetings. These subjects allow for opportunities to enrich students' language skills through discourse. The goal is to get students to participate in discussions in the classroom. Typically the teacher presents the lesson and then I may try to engage students in a conversation about what they learned. This may come in the form of me posing open-endedquestions "What did you think about what we read?" or "What do you think the author is trying to teach us about xxx?" I have found it very useful to go and see how my speech-language students are functioning in the general education classroom. It allows one to get a true picture of how that student's disability does or does not affect their participation as well as to see what skills are or are not transferring from therapy into their everyday life.

5. Conclusion

Discourse is a skill that is vital to human existence. We must learn to communicate effectively in order to function in society. I hope that this paper provides you with some ideas and strategies to elicit discourse and communication from your students.